

# Firefighter killed, homes destroyed in Australian bushfires

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Record-high early December temperatures, strong winds and a high fuel load built up over several wet years created the conditions for catastrophic fires last week in parts of New South Wales (NSW) and Tasmania, many of which are still burning. An experienced firefighter was killed—the second already this bushfire season—and hundreds of homes and other structures were destroyed.

Firefighter John Lohan, 59, died after being struck by a falling tree while supervising back-burning efforts in Nerong, on the NSW mid-north coast. He was an experienced division commander for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). He worked at the Munmorah Depot for nearly 30 years and was deployed to fight fires in other parts of the state over that period.

His tragic death follows that of a South Australian Country Fire Service firefighter, Peter Curtis, who died last month fighting a grass fire at Pinkawillinie Conservation Park. Curtis worked as a strike team leader and sector commander over his 30-year career in firefighting. The exact cause of his death is still under investigation.

On Saturday, 16 homes were burnt to the ground at Koolewong on the Central Coast, an hour north of Sydney. Around 60 people from the Koolewong and Woy Woy areas had to evacuate their homes. About two hours north of there, another four homes were destroyed around the Mid-Coast hinterland town of Bulahdelah.

More than 50 fires are still burning across the state, with several not yet under control. The NSW Labor government has declared a natural disaster for the local government areas of Central Coast, Mid-Coast, Upper Hunter, Muswellbrook, Warrumbungle and Dubbo. It is estimated that around 20,000 hectares of land has been impacted so far around NSW.

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 50 fire vehicles and appliances, nine aircraft and 250 firefighters were sent to fight the Koolewong fire.

Across the state, a total of around 1,500 firefighters and 300 vehicles were mobilised trying to get blazes under control over the weekend.

Bulahdelah resident Garry Morgan told the *Guardian* that he only had half an hour's notice to leave or stay, after a friend rang to warn him. Aided by firefighters, Morgan was able to save his home, while the house next door burned to the ground.

Morgan said he had never seen the land so dry in 30 years of living in the same house: "We used to get rain every week. We've never had fires like this."

In Crawford River, just outside of Bulahdelah, Nassim Daghel told the ABC he had not received warnings from emergency services after a decision by electricity provider Essential Energy to go ahead with scheduled maintenance on Friday, although the fire had started the previous day. This left Daghel and others without power and internet service.

Daghel explained that, on Thursday, the Rural Fire Service had said it was "safe to stay." Without an internet service, he missed critical messages about the perilous change in conditions the following day. He was also unable to run his water pumps due to the power outage, leaving him to carry water by hand from a dam.

He said: "It was about 1:30pm on the Friday, I walked outside and everything was smoke, and then I looked outside here, and everything was on fire." He then made the decision to evacuate.

Essential Energy defended its decision to continue with the planned outage, saying in a statement that no fire weather warning had been issued. A Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) spokesperson confirmed that the threshold of "extreme" fire danger had not been reached by Friday morning, although the fire was already burning.

Likewise in Tasmania, the ABC reported that the BOM did not issue a fire weather warning before fires broke out in 30 locations across the state, because the initial

forecasts did not meet the required threshold.

In Dolphin Sands, on the state's east coast, 19 houses and around 200 other structures were destroyed on Thursday and Friday, with another 40 properties damaged. Hot and gusty winds propelled the fire through the highly flammable landscape.

Simon Pilkington from the Tasmania Fire Service, said Dolphin Sands is “covered predominantly in coastal heath.... That type of fuel, with a high oil content, all it needs is a fire to start and wind and it'll drive under almost any conditions.”

Dolphin Sands was one of the areas regarded by the BOM as fitting the “extreme” fire danger category, but the number of smaller areas with that designation did not reach the 10 percent of total land mass needed to trigger a fire weather warning. Most of the other areas affected by fires were regarded as only in the “high” category.

Liberal Premier Jeremy Rockliff announced a paltry \$250 for adults, \$125 for children and \$1,000 for families experiencing hardship as a result of the fires at Dolphin Sands, Glenlusk and Levendale, barely enough for one night in alternative accommodation.

In NSW, the Labor government made an even more meagre offering: “payments of \$900 to households where their home has been destroyed or severely damaged and up to \$180 for households experiencing hardship as a result of the bushfires.”

While conditions have now eased with the arrival of a cooler front, the early onset of the bushfire season dovetails with long-range weather forecasts from the BOM. The bureau predicts higher than average summer temperatures across the entire country, while warmer ocean temperatures will create the conditions for storms. Dry lightning, one characteristic of summer storms, is a common source of ignition for bushfires.

A La Niña climate pattern, typically associated with higher rainfall and cooler temperatures, has been in place since early October, but this year it is “relatively weak and relatively short-lived,” senior BOM climatologist Dr Zhi-Weng Chua told the *Guardian*.

“La Niña leans towards cooler temperatures, but global warming is influencing this—there is a push and pull, and maybe La Niña is not the dominant influence and global warming is having more influence,” Chua continued.

David Bowman, professor of pyrogeography and fire science at the University of Tasmania, told the *Guardian*, in a world of increasing climate instability, “the No. 1 message is: Expect the unexpected.”

The increasing unpredictability and severity of bushfires

is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon. The “State of Wildfires 2024–2025” report, published on the Earth Systems Science Data website, analysed global changes in fire patterns and locations. One of the core findings of the report was that the era of “small, frequent grass/savannah fires” being the dominant global fire pattern appears to be shifting.

The report found that fires are increasingly occurring in forests, wetlands, and other carbon-dense ecosystems—where even a smaller burned area can release large amounts of carbon and cause long-term ecological damage.

In the past 12 months, catastrophic and record-breaking wildfires have hit Japan, Canada, South Korea, Turkey, France, Spain and the United States. In each of these fires, firefighters struggled to bring the blazes under control amid extreme weather conditions and inadequate warning systems, preparation, resources and manpower.

Despite increasingly urgent warnings by climate scientists about the necessity of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the main contributor to global warming, governments the world over, including the current federal Labor government, continue to approve new coal, gas and oil operations, facilitating vast corporate profits, while relegating renewable energy to token projects and lip service.

The destruction in NSW and Tasmania this early in the bushfire season, along with the deaths of two firefighters, are a warning to the working class. Capitalism, under which even the continued viability of human life on Earth is subordinated to profit, is incompatible with solving the climate crisis.

The necessary scientific response to the growing threat of bushfires and extreme weather events requires a fight by workers and youth for a political alternative, socialism, under which society's vast resources and knowledge can be directed to resolving these existential questions, not increasing the already vast riches of the wealthy few.



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